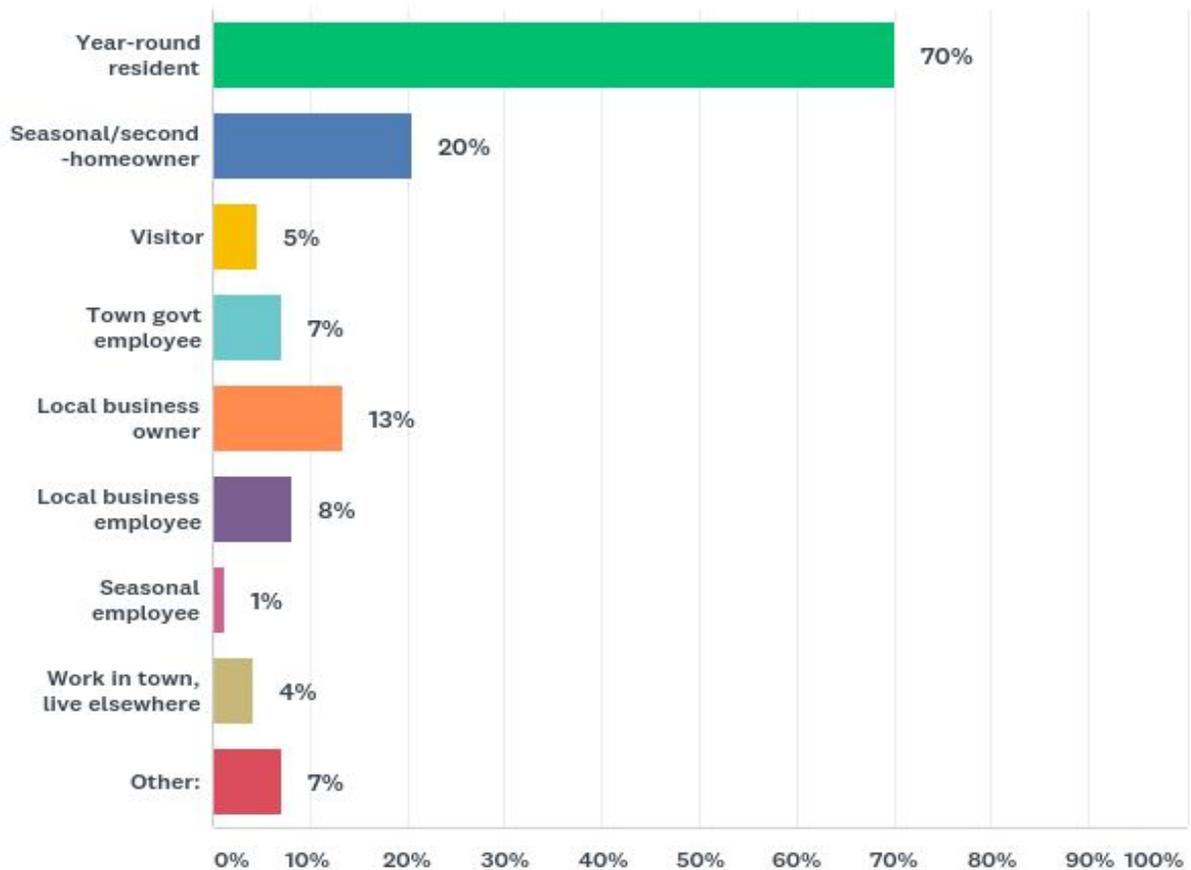# Provincetown Civil Discourse Initiative

Summary Report of Findings from Survey & Interviews

The Town of Provincetown asked the MA Office of Public Collaboration (MOPC) to assist the Town with exploring ways to improve and revive civil discourse in town interactions, especially online, social media interactions. Promoting civil discourse means finding ways for the community to talk with one another where all voices can be heard and decisions can be made together.

To date, the MOPC facilitation team has conducted interviews with 24 community members and disseminated a community-wide survey which received 171 responses. Below is a brief summary of what we heard.

Survey Results:

Who took the community-wide survey?

Category	Percentage
Year-round resident	70%
Seasonal/second-homeowner	20%
Visitor	5%
Town govt employee	7%
Local business owner	13%
Local business employee	8%
Seasonal employee	1%
Work in town, live elsewhere	4%
Other:	7%

How many years have you been a resident (full- or part-time), visitor, or employee in Provincetown (whichever is the longest)?
　　<5 yrs: 12%　　　5-10 yrs: 17%　　　10-19 yrs: 25%　　　20+ yrs: 40%　　　Lifers: 6%
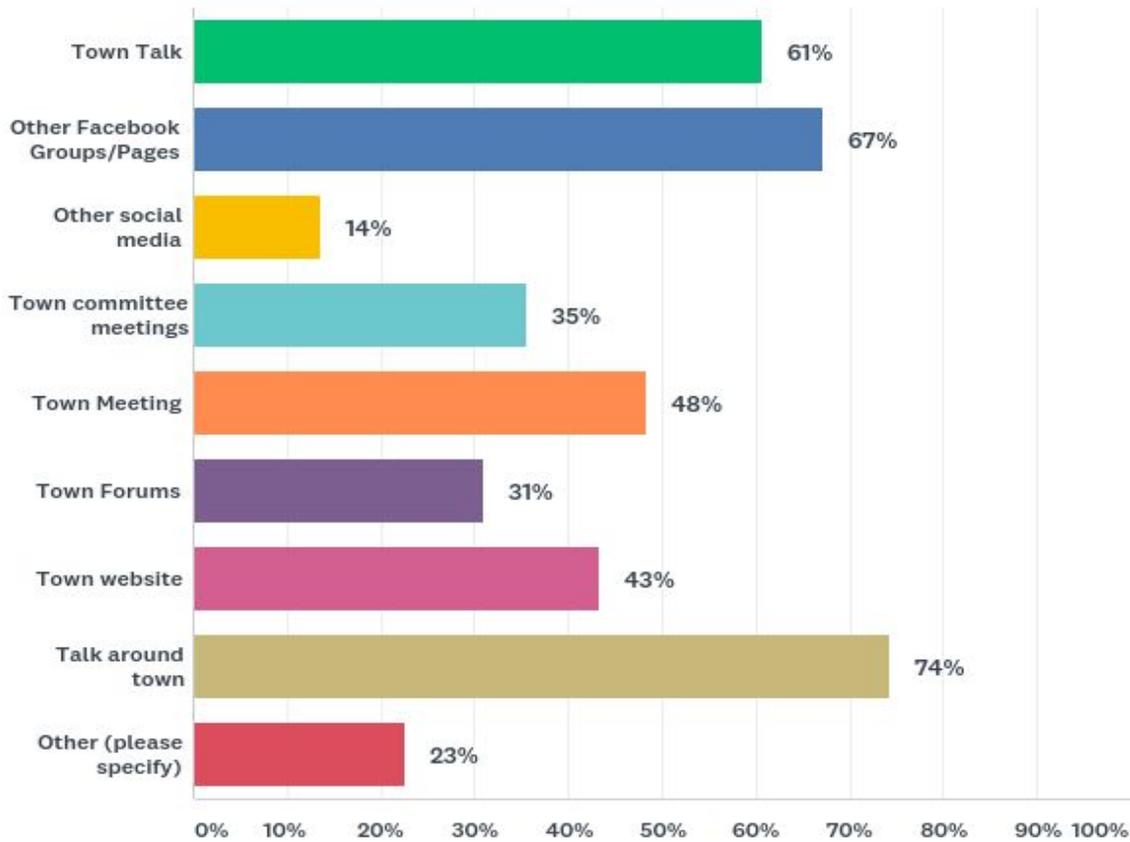
Age Ranges:
　　<25: 0%　　　26-45:11%　　　46-65: 64%　　　66+:25%　　　Prefer not to say:1%
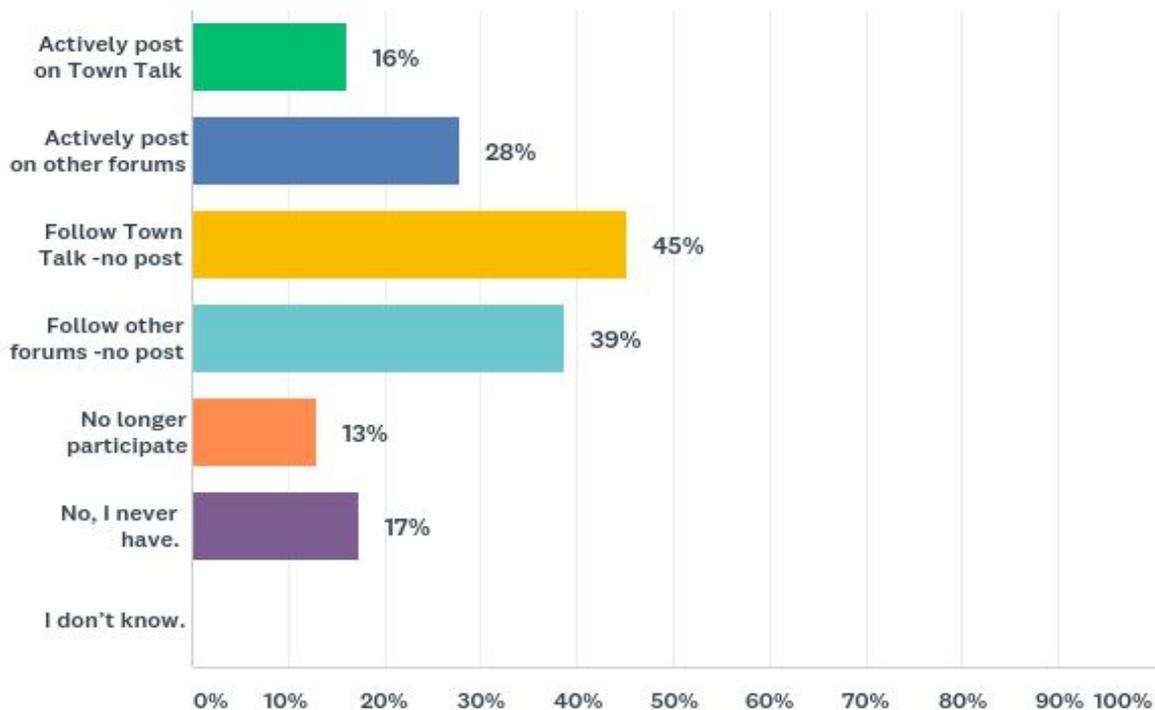
Gender:
　　Male: 54%　　　Female: 43%　　　Non-binary: 1%　　　Prefer not to say: 2%

Where do you go to learn about and discuss current town topics?

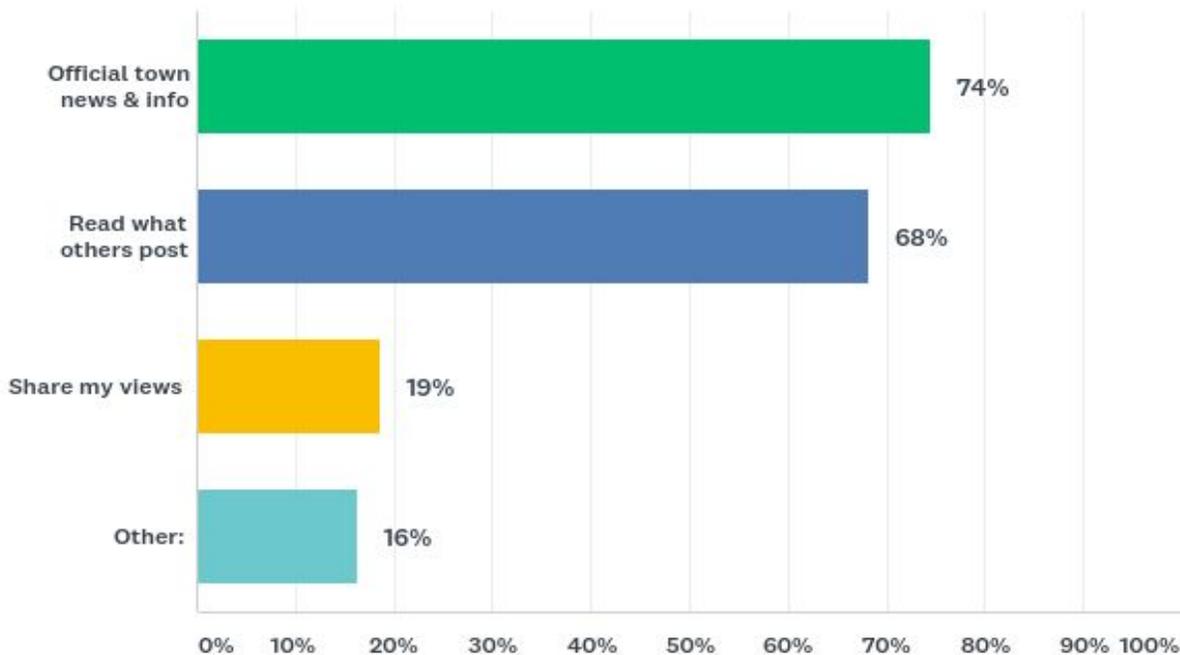"Other" includes newspapers like the Banner, Cape Cod Times, and PTV

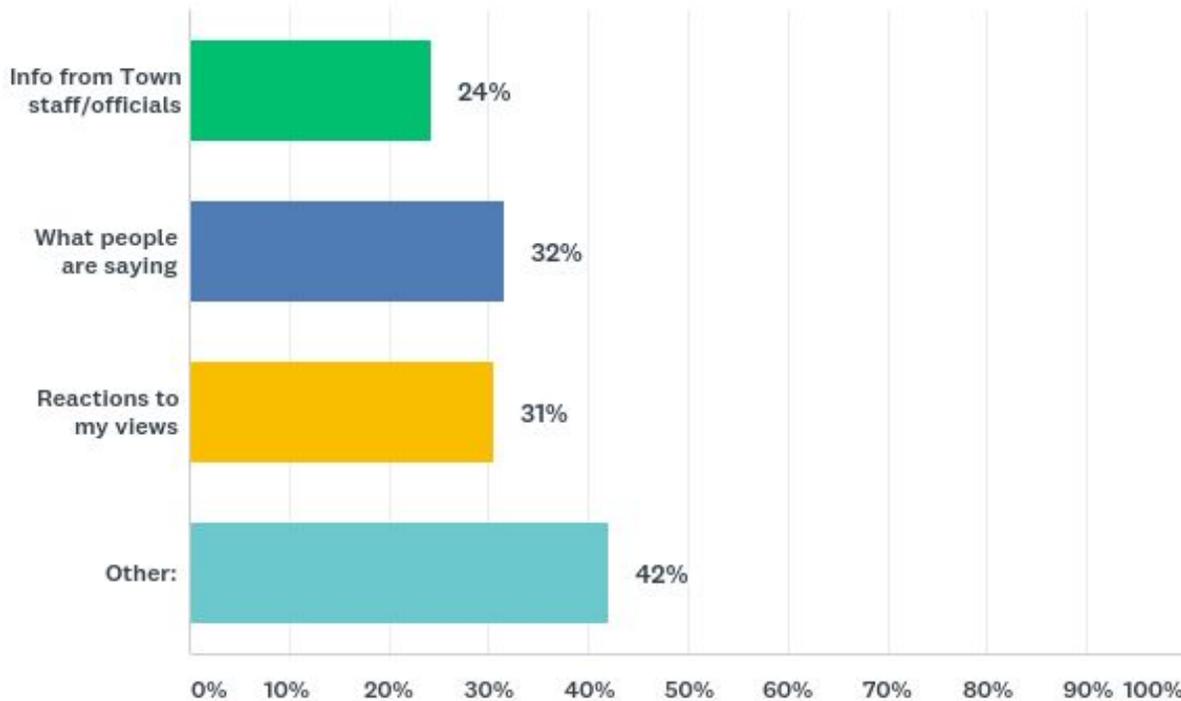## Do you participate in any online forums/groups to discuss town issues?

Response	Percentage
Actively post on Town Talk	16%
Actively post on other forums	28%
Follow Town Talk -no post	45%
Follow other forums -no post	39%
No longer participate	13%
No, I never have.	17%
I don't know.	

Why do you go to Town Talk?

Response	Percentage
Official town news & info	74%
Read what others post	68%
Share my views	19%
Other:	16%

Under "other," people mentioned they go to check out political gossip, for information (posting on recycling and emergencies), as part of browsing Facebook, or they avoid Town Talk altogether. Most go to get official town news and information. Not as many people share on Town Talk as much as they read what others are sharing.
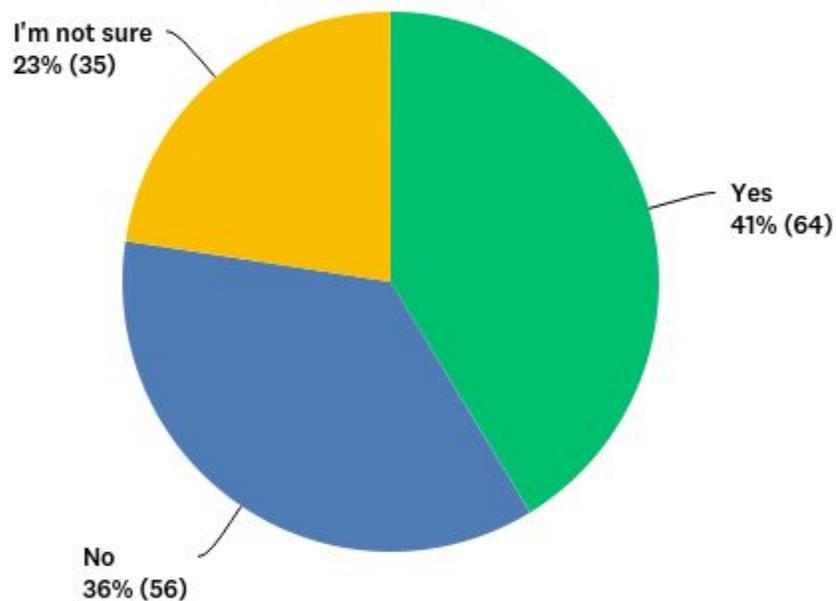
Why do you no longer go to Town Talk or online forums?

Concerns about:

Under "other," people mentioned belligerent members, use of personal attacks, unproductive conversations, and conversations dominated by a small group of hostile individuals.

Do you feel you have a voice in the community?

Those who <u>do not</u> feel as though they have a voice mentioned that bullying has become so severe it has kept them from speaking, second-homeowners contributions are not welcome, the select-persons and committee members are not accessible or interested in hearing people's concerns, and that unless they have money, they feel their opinions fall on deaf ears.

Those who <u>do</u> feel as though they have a voice said that being involved on boards or committees gives them a voice, having connections to those in charge is helpful, and they have a voice through voting.

Select Quotes:

"While I understand that second home owners should not be eligible to vote in town elections, I do think there should be a compromise way to have our voices heard. I believe for the most part we all have Provincetown's best interests at heart."

"I think most people can share their opinion. That's what this town is known for. Good or bad opinions. People speak out. But, people also stop speaking -- because they know they'll get blasted for their opinions."

"The impression I have is that Ptown governance is very much a closed system. If you haven't been part of it for a long time, you're an outsider and your views/opinions are not welcome."

What are the biggest challenges facing town related to how people talk/treat each other and make decisions together?

The major themes that emerged from this question were: second homeowners feel unwelcome to participate, deep divisions within the town, bullying, spread of misinformation, overall lack of civility and respect, unbalanced voices in town, and distrust of Government Officials.

Select Quotes:

"The divide between part time and full time creates an issue. We all love this place, so why should it matter."
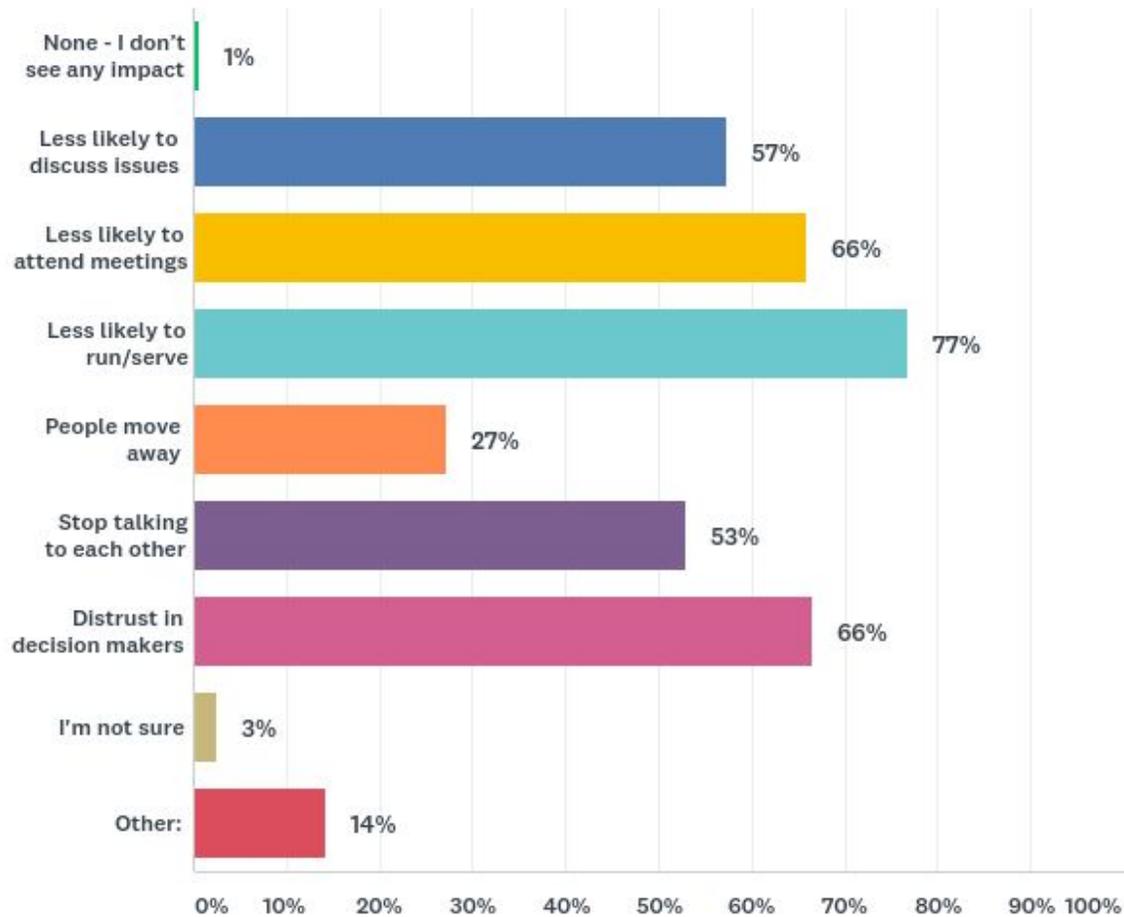
"Bullying online leads competent people to stay quiet and not step forward to participate or serve."

"Town leadership has not done enough to shut down misogyny in meetings and public forums."

"I've seen a few males who always try to bully females when they don't like what the women are saying. I then just withdraw from the conversation."

"Online social commentary is nasty, personal, and oftentimes based in gossip or untruths. This makes it difficult to build consensus and accomplish positive changes in town, and it makes life here, which already has its challenges, harder."

What are the negative impacts of incivility (disrespectful treatment of people with differing views) in the community?

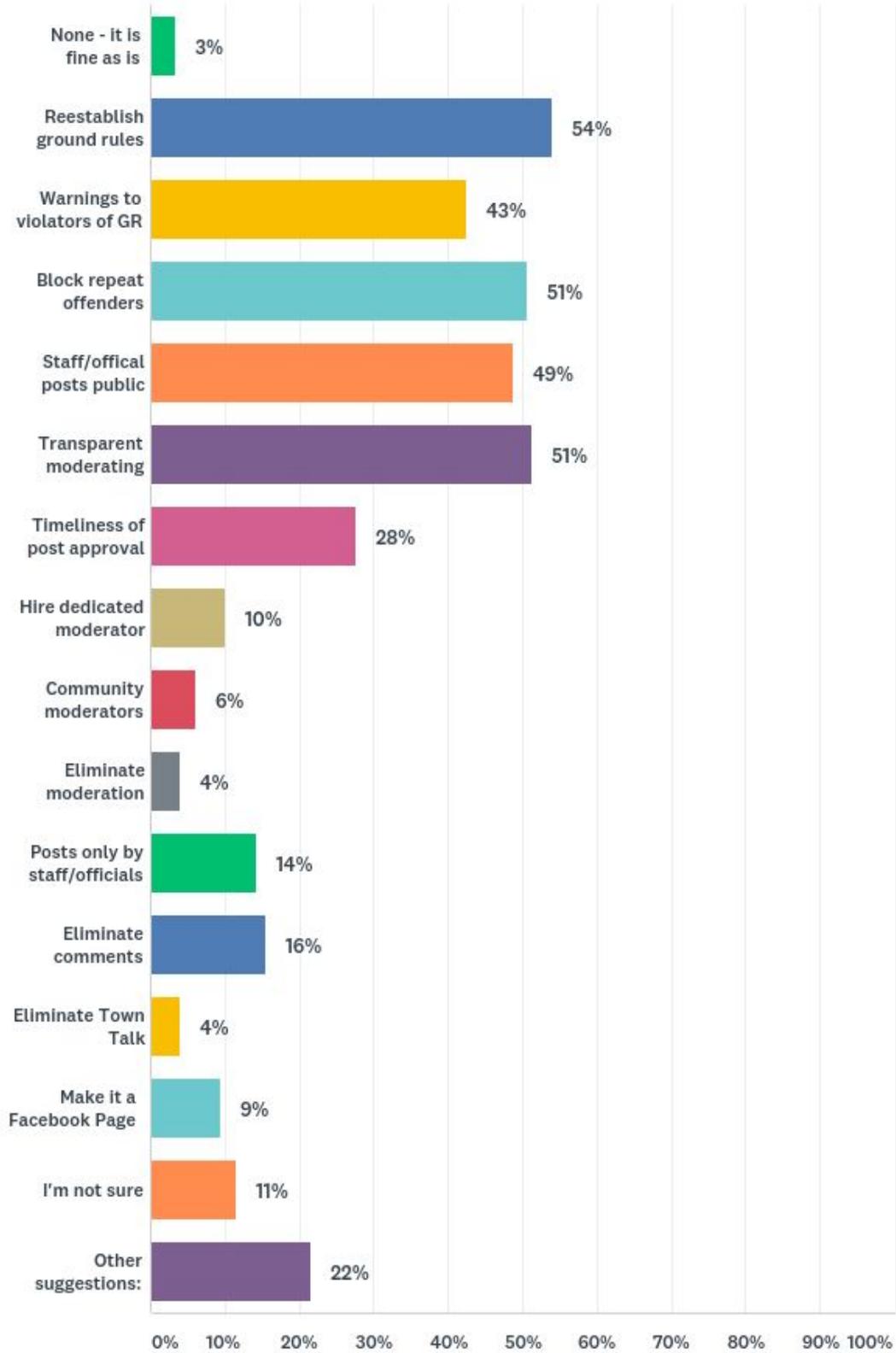| Category	Percentage
None - I don't see any impact	1%
Less likely to discuss issues	57%
Less likely to attend meetings	66%
Less likely to run/serve	77%
People move away	27%
Stop talking to each other	53%
Distrust in decision makers	66%
I'm not sure	3%
Other:	14%

Under "other," people replied that people are moving away, the town is deeply divided, and the overall environment is unfavorable to sharing thoughts and opinions.

Select Quotes:

"People are moving away. Locals are disheartened with the current state of affairs in town. The toxicity is at a heightened level."

"Fear for safety both personal and business. The cruelty online also comes with stalker like research into people's pasts."

Some might suggest changes need to be made to Town Talk to improve civil discourse. Which of the below actions do you believe would be helpful?

Action	Percentage
None - it is fine as is	3%
Reestablish ground rules	54%
Warnings to violators of GR	43%
Block repeat offenders	51%
Staff/offical posts public	49%
Transparent moderating	51%
Timeliness of post approval	28%
Hire dedicated moderator	10%
Community moderators	6%
Eliminate moderation	4%
Posts only by staff/officials	14%
Eliminate comments	16%
Eliminate Town Talk	4%
Make it a Facebook Page	9%
I'm not sure	11%
Other suggestions:	22%

Under "other," people suggested they would like to see Town Talk as a forum where only town officials post, while others want to limit public participation.

Select Quote:
> "Town talk is a great way to disperse information. I would turn off comments. If there are questions, is there a way to submit and get all answered by staff only. Leave out the public comments. I like Provincetown Wind and Sea because all meetings are posted with link to agenda and the live stream link to PTV. No other social account does that."

What role should Social Media/Town Talk play in Town decision making?

To this open-ended question, most responses fell into one of the following categories:

No role: 11%   Minimal: 12%   Source of information: 30%   Medium for discourse: 13%
Provide insight: 15%   Play a large role: 9%   Other: 10%

Select Quote:
> "It is an integral part of how the town communicates with people and the ability for people to discuss things. It needs to stay but needs to be moderated better so when people start to troll each other it gets taken care of quickly."

Thinking outside of online interaction, what else should be done to improve in-person civility/relationships and build community?

Here, responses included the need to improve communication and offer more opportunities for in-person meetings, including small-group discussion sessions. Both part-time and full-time residents felt as though more support is needed in community building. Many would like to see a more unified Provincetown.

Select Quotes:
> "There needs to be more sharing of everybody's opinion, not just registered voters. We all have a huge stake and what happens to Provincetown and we all care deeply. So it should not be one group versus another it should be all of us working together towards making everybody's life better."

> "A former boss who chaired a congressional committee had an adage: 'It's not enough to be fair. It's important that you appear fair.' These folks [Town Government] could take a lesson"

> "Most people behave better when they have face to face interaction in Town Forums, Town Meeting, Town Committees."

What would you personally be willing to do or what have you done to help improve civil discourse?

Responses included participating in an official role, setting an example by showing kindness and respect, discouraging negativity, and providing information on divisive topics. While many people choose not to engage, others replied that they want to participate in in-person moderated forums.

Select Quotes:

"I would like to see an arena where I was comfortable speaking out about what is going on in town, without being attacked, as I have been."

"I think people just want to be heard, so the first thing to do is listen... and then respond appropriately and with correct information. Always try to set the example of what acceptable behavior can look/sound like."

"Hold focus groups. let people share their opinions IN PERSON -- NOT online. create a plan from these meetings. doing this survey is a good first start. .. create a vision statement around Civility for the Town. Create a Plan. State a goal that Provincetown become ONE OF THE HAPPIEST AND NICEST TOWNS TO LIVE IN AND WORK IN. (not just visit) -- and, then create a roadmap on how to get there. Do anti-bullying sessions. Employ the services of a group to train and coach people How to Disagree Constructively"

Interview Responses:

Below is a brief summary of some of the topics which emerged from the 24 interviews. Interviewees included town officials, year-round and seasonal residents, lifetime residents and newcomers, business owners, and employees.

Town Talk and Social Media

Interviewees described a challenging environment on community social media channels. Not all felt that this was an issue, however. People discussed the environment on Town Talk as being problematic, although some noted it has improved of late. It was also noted that some of the other community Facebook groups also experience the same kind of divisiveness.

Use of Town Talk: Overall, interviewees described Town Talk as a vast and appreciated source of information for residents and the community. It provides news, updates, and also insight into current feelings and opinions of some community members. Generally, Town Talk is not considered an effective medium for dialogue, as many people keep opinions to themselves out of fear of bullying or retaliation. Thus, it does not give a full picture of where the community stands on a certain matter and it is also not effective at gauging the amount of support/opposition a matter will have when it goes to vote. People also raised concerns about what community members share on Town Talk. Many rarely question what people post, and this can lead to rumors, conjecture, and the spread of misinformation.

Some interviewees expressed concern with how engaged people seem on social media, yet many are absent from participating on boards/committees, attending meetings, or voting. There was also concern expressed about access to news and information for those who do not use social media.

Select Quotes:

" It [Social Media] became a method and tool of saying what's on your mind and not really caring."

"If you don't share facts and information with them, they will make their own stories about it."

Desire for Moderators Online: Overall, interviewees expressed a need for improving the moderation of Town Talk. There is currently unevenness in the timeliness of posts, people are not always given reasons for why something is denied, and people are not really sure who does the moderating or what criteria are used. On the other hand, concerns were also raised by some that increased moderation is a form of censorship. Some interviewees suggested adding additional moderators to Town Talk to help with timeliness and to keep discourse in check and mitigate conflict. However, there was some uncertainty about who could fill this role, be considered neutral, as well as have the ability to put in the time needed. The idea of community-run moderation was raised. Several people also said it was time to turn off comments altogether, or that commentary for some posts should be turned off.

Town Governance

Some interviewees viewed town boards and committees as dysfunctional and unable to collaborate, both among their members and in their interactions with residents. The same people often serve on multiple boards/committees and have often served for a long time. New people are hesitant to volunteer or run for election because of bullying online, particularly in light of the hostility in recent elections. Also, people noted an issue with lack of attendance and participation in official meetings and voting. These all result in a small group of residents often making decisions for the whole town. It was also noted that serving on a board or committee is often thankless, with members being criticized or harassed, both in person and online.

It also came to light that particular groups of the community are not interested in participating at all, some are interested but unsure of how to participate, while many second homeowners want to participate but have few options given their non-resident status.

Regarding information dissemination and preparation for meetings, some noted that the information packets for town meetings are not provided in a way that can be easily read and digested by most people.

Select Quotes:

"People show up to Town Meeting and don't understand the articles, because written by lawyers"

"If I was running for public office, would be scared to do it because of Facebook."

"Who does the Selectboard answer to? There is no recourse – that's a problem. If not follow code of ethics – no consequences. We can vote different people in, but if no one wants to run for election…"

"80% of Ptown are second homeowners. The local board could allow second homeowners to sit on boards – perhaps not as permanent members – but at least allow them to speak at Town Meeting."

Divisiveness

Numerous examples of divisiveness emerged from the interviews that people felt fuel incivility and a lack of community cohesion.

Interviewees mentioned that some people are afraid to express views due to fear of bullying and how it may impact their businesses or jobs. Others described the negative impact vulgar language and name calling have on them and others. Examples were shared of gender specific expletives directed primarily at women. Some women interviewed feel there is a misogynistic climate in town, and a couple of men mentioned feeling their gender has been used against them.

Those newer to Provincetown feel as though they are not welcomed by long-time residents. In addition, some noted that immigrants are not viewed as welcome despite the community's reliance on them for seasonal labor. Others identified rifts between the "haves" and "have nots", residents and second homeowners, the LGBTQ and straight community, and between men and women, among others.

The reality of the resort-town environment in Provincetown is that many who come to town are vacationers visiting only for a short time. This means many residents do not have a sense of who their neighbors are anymore. Additionally, using the Internet as a staple of communication enables an increased emotional distance between residents.

However, people also noted times where the community rallied together, especially when there was a cause to support. There is a desire and need for more opportunities to bring the community together.

Select Quotes:
> *"You can be civil and disagree, but it doesn't seem like people do it."*
>
> *"Everyone's voice is important and equally important."*
>
> *"People have built identity on being cynical or suspicious, so it's hard to dialogue with them."*
>
> *"If you think it [views] might hurt your business, you shut up"*
>
> *"Straight people can travel and go anywhere and everywhere. Gay people need to feel they are welcome and safe"*

Next Step: Community Dialogues

The input gathered in the survey and interviews will provide a basis for community dialogues the week of April 24-30, 2019. Members of the Provincetown community are invited to come together and discuss how to build a more inclusive and engaged community. The schedule is included below.

Wed 4/24	Thurs 4/25	Fri 4/26	Sat 4/27	Sun 4/28	Mon 4/29	Tues 4/30
		10:30-12:30pm The Commons	10am-12pm Library			
	1-3pm Library	2:30-4:30pm The Commons	2-4pm Library	2-4pm Library	2-4pm Council on Aging	1-3pm Library
6-8pm Town Hall	5:45-7:45pm Library				6-8pm Town Hall	